

knit more nearly together by lymricks

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Summary:

Steve takes a second to feel relieved it's not Dustin getting all sorts of arrested in places he shouldn't be, then he goes back to staring.

It's Billy, who looks as good now as he did the last time Steve saw him: three years ago. He looks just as complicated, too. He's got bruises on his face, a split lip.

The officer clears her throat, slowly, awkwardly, and Steve realizes they've been staring at each other for a while, now. He imagines, for a moment, saying that he doesn't know this person, this stranger, pretending that Billy Hargrove was someone he used to know and kind of remembers, but--no, he's not willing to sign for him, or whatever. To vouch for him. "Mr. Harrington?" the officer prompts.

Steve runs a hand through his hair. "Steve," he corrects, a little absently. "Yeah, I'll--yeah. Do you have a form, or something?"

Three years later, Steve Harrington signs Billy Hargrove out of a police station. This, it turns out, is only the beginning.

1. I

Author's Note:

Listen, there is now [INCREDIBLE ART](#) by [ningdom](#) for this thing I wrote and I am DYING about it so please go look! Not really spoilers I don't think, but maybe proceed with caution if you like everything to be a surprise/the text to confirm your predictions.

Steve likes this new life he's built for himself. He can think that, and mean it--almost 100%--as he stands behind the coffee shop's counter and looks out the big picture windows. It's quiet for a Tuesday at 8am, like everyone decided at once to call out sick from work, but Steve doesn't really mind. Outside, it looks like winter, mid-November cresting cold, but not quite snowy. Inside, it smells like coffee and sounds like the manager taking inventory behind him. It's quiet enough that he can hear the scratch of her pencil as she makes a tally.

For a second, he lets his eyes close, just listening and smelling and breathing. He's a few years out from Hawkins, now, but he never forgets: how lucky he was to make it out alive, the wrong-wrong-wrong squelch of ground under his feet, lifting Dustin off the ground, nodding his chin into the top of the kid's head and wishing he'd had enough time to get just one more stupid kid out. And then, getting out.

The bell above the door rings and Steve lets his eyes open. It's a cop, and not a regular, but she echoes Hopper in a way and Steve likes that about her instantly. City cops, he's come to learn, aren't really quite the same as the chief in Hawkins. "Morning, officer," he says, easy and friendly. He feels like himself here, the himself he was with Nancy, even, or the himself he was working toward with her.

"You Steve Harrington?" the officer asks.

Steve blinks. "Uh, yeah, that's me."

The cop shifts her weight once, twice, three times. Steve's holding

onto the counter, squeezes hard enough his knuckles go white. There's a kind of panic building in his stomach, the kind he knows is always there, but is mostly dormant. Dormant like he imagines the monsters are. Sleeping and waiting. Steve likes his life here, and he usually keeps his shit together, but the cop shifts her weight a fourth time and Steve says, "Officer--?"

"I don't usually ask favors from kids I don't know," the cop says, and Steve can actually feel the hairs on the back of his neck fall back into place as his spine and the knot in his stomach loosen. "But I'm gonna do it this time, so hear me out before you say no."

"Ok, yeah, sure," Steve says, glad his manager is in the back, glad it's so quiet, glad he can breathe again.

"There's this kid I picked up a few times. Minor stuff, but he's getting himself in trouble. Places he shouldn't be. Not every weekend, but enough. It's gonna be a big problem for him soon. I need someone in the city to vouch for him and keep an eye on him so he can get--I'm pulling some strings here, Mr. Harrington, you understand--so he can get bail while I try and sort this shit out."

This is a different kind of knot in his stomach. *Kid in places he shouldn't be. Bail.* The words bounce around inside Steve's head and he thinks that he just talked to Dustin on the phone--God, was it already two weeks? He needs to call more--and Dustin should've told him if he was coming into the city and getting *arrested* and this is--he can't say no. He's going to drive Dustin and his friends to check out colleges soon, going to jail is--unacceptable.

The cop watches all that play out behind Steve's eyes, he's sure, he's always had a shit poker face. Steve runs a hand through his hair, aware that a part of his brain that sounds an awful lot like Nancy is saying the cop hasn't even asked the question yet as he says, "Yeah, shit. Yeah of course. Where is he?"

Steve tells his manager something close to the truth, gets the rest of the day off, and climbs into the cop car.

We're going on an adventure, says the part of his brain that sounds like Dustin. Steve hits his head back against the headrest.

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Leaving Hawkins had been a fluke.

Four days after graduation, Steve had been talking with his parents at the dining room table. A gap year, his dad was saying, shore up your academics so that you can get a business degree and work with me.

Yeah, yeah, of course, Steve had said, feeling sick and small. He would take classes at the local community college, learn to write or read or do math, whatever it was he wasn't quite good enough at yet. No more basketball, well maybe on the weekends, it's important you *focus*, son, you wasted so much time this past year.

Steve had thought it wasn't wasted, really, if he was off fighting *monsters*, but ok, sure, whatever. Yeah, dad, I get you.

His mother had been silent, as she had been, a lot back then. Steve had known then--as he knows now--that she loved him, and that he'd disappointed her. It was a lot of weight for him to carry four days out from graduation, though.

Then: he was sitting at the diner in town, staring into a mug of coffee, when Hopper approached him. "Hey, kid," he said, in a way that made Steve sit up and feel noticed. He offered the chief a smile, and Hopper asked what he was doing with his summer, and Steve had said nothing, really, just getting ready to work with my dad, and Hopper had said, I'm going to Chicago for a meeting, seems like the thing a kid should do after graduation, go to the city and try life.

Later, Steve would explain to his hysterically crying mother that no, Hopper hadn't kidnapped him and no, Steve wasn't coming back home. That had surprised him, a little. He had thought of that big empty house and all the hours he had spent in it and wondered how she'd even noticed that he was gone.

Having Hopper in his life was kind of like having the good kind of crazy uncle, or what he imagined that person would be like. Nancy had explained that it was a sort of *trope*, and that Hopper was more to any of them than a *trope*, but Steve liked the way he fit the mold. When it became clear Steve wasn't leaving Chicago, but that his

parents still loved him and would give him a little money to get his feet under him--if he took classes, the deal was, at first, if this was still a *gap year* before business school--Hopper had been the one who helped him get settled. Mom and dad would pay the bills, would say *we love you, honey* on the phone, but they didn't come out to Chicago. That was all Hopper.

Hopper, who helped him carry a couch up the stairs. Hopper, who rolled his eyes as Steve fretted about which rug would make the living room in his tiny apartment look *brighter*, and Hopper, who showed up from his hotel room at 4 in the fucking morning as Steve sat on the floor and couldn't breathe or move or think because there were monsters fucking *everywhere*. Hopper who waited out the panic attacks and helped Steve figure out how to take a public bus and how to sell his car and how to get a job.

Ok, so Hopper was less like a crazy uncle and more like a parent, probably, a real one. Steve would never in a million years have thought that Jim Hopper would be anything to him other than the one to avoid if you were drinking underage, but then monsters had come out of the ground, and Steve supposed that Hopper was like that to all of them.

The first time he had talked to Dustin on the phone had been right after Hopper left Chicago to drive back to Hawkins. It was just starting to get dark, late because it was summer, and Steve had been staring out his window, sitting on the mattress that he'd lugged up the--he fucking swears, eight *million flights of goddamn stairs*--thinking about monsters and parents and best friends, and so he'd called Dustin, but had to then call Nancy's house, because that's where Dustin was, because...things didn't change, really. He'd hoped they didn't.

"Hey," he'd said.

"Hey! We are in the middle of the *best*--shut *up* Lucas I'm talking to him first--the *best* meal I think I've ever had in my entire life, shit it's so good. Anyway, I'll save you some! If you want. Lucas's mom made it and they brought it over, and it's so good, man. Trust me, you want some. I'll save you some of mine."

"That sounds great, Dustin. It does--it's just," and this part was--harder. "I'm not going to be back. Not for a while, anyway. I uhm," Steve had stopped, fiddled with the chord of his landline--his own landline, what the fuck. "I, uh, moved to Chicago. For a while."

"Oh," Dustin had said. "Shit, that's...that's cool, man. I just thought--Lucas, *fuck off*--I just thought that you'd, y'know, stick around for a bit."

"You can have my bat," Steve had said, suddenly. "Y'know, keep an eye on it for me. I'll be back soon, and you never know."

Dustin hadn't hung up on him, but it had been a near thing. The phone had been passed around, last of all to Will, who made him talk to Nancy after, who cried, but was also happy for him in that way that made his stomach flop with a love he had no right to, anymore, and she had talked to him, the sounds of her house in the background, until the sun had set and he'd felt able to fall asleep.

A year passed. Then two. He stopped counting. Steve had a job, an apartment he loved, new friends. It wasn't a gap year, but he did start coming back to Hawkins for the holidays.

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The cop pulls into her precinct, and Steve follows her into the station. He's bouncing on his heels to see Dustin, but the cop tells him to wait at the front. She's gone for longer than Steve expected, but he guesses pulling some sort of magical cop strings has a lot of paperwork involved. He turns around and looks at the flyers tacked onto the bulletin board. There's been a string of robberies in this neighborhood, there's some sort of canned goods drive next week. Steve gets that feeling like all of Chicago had called out sick today, because even this police station is quiet. He's looking at a flyer for some sort of literary thing--Nancy would like it, he's thinking--when he hears the gate to the back of the station swing open. He's reaching up to take one of the little tabs off, trying not to tear the poster, so he doesn't turn around until--

"Are you reading now?"

Steve, who had been expecting Dustin's voice, goes still. His hand is still on the flyer, still ready to tear that tab off and call Nancy and tell her about this book group he thinks she'd like. He's always doing that, calling Nancy to tell her about things he thinks she'd like. Someone, someday, will probably tell him that means he's lonely. For now, he lets himself believe he's just-thoughtful.

He's frozen, battling parallel feelings of relief and confusion. He's glad, he's so fucking glad that Dustin hasn't been arrested in Chicago. The confusion part is--more complicated.

Billy looks as good now as he did the last time Steve saw him, three years ago. He looks just as complicated, too. He's got bruises on his face, a split lip.

The officer clears her throat, slowly, awkwardly, and Steve realizes they've been staring at each other for a while, now. He imagines, for a moment, saying that he doesn't know this person, this stranger, pretending that Billy Hargrove was someone he used to know and kind of remembers, but--no, he's not willing to sign for him, or whatever. To vouch for him. "Mr. Harrington?" the officer prompts.

Steve runs a hand through his hair. "Steve," he corrects, a little absently. "Yeah, I'll--yeah. Do you have a form, or something?"

And then they're outside in the cold Chicago winter air, walking because Steve lives close by.

"How did you know I was in Chicago?" Steve finally asks. He wants to ask *why did you give them my name*, but he can't figure out how to form the words. He's got to work up to that, probably.

"Max," Billy says, like it's a complete sentence. It is, sort of. What he means is, *Dustin told Lucas that you weren't coming back, who told Max, who mentioned it to me*. Steve thinks there are way too many connections in a small town. He thinks the monster-fighting probably only made those connections stronger.

"Why'd you give that cop my name?" Steve asks before he can talk himself out of it.

Billy shivers. His arms are turning red, and he wraps them around himself. He looks small like this, in a white t-shirt with blood on it, beat up and shivering. Steve had never--not once, not in all the years he'd known him now--thought Billy Hargrove had ever looked small. He thinks it's the cold, but he also thinks it's Chicago. It's easier for Steve to feel big, here. He's got his feet under him for real, not in that *King Steve of High School* kind of way, but in a real way.

"Because I knew you were in Chicago, dipshit, and I needed someone she'd believe I knew, or I was going to spend who the fuck knows how long in jail, and I didn't want to do that. So thanks, or whatever, for picking me up and signing for me like I'm a fucking package--" Steve blinks, wondering if Nancy would be proud he'd used a simile that someone else would understand, even if it was just in his own brain--"but I'll see you at my, whatever, hearing," and then Billy turns to walk away.

"Uh, what the fuck, no?" Steve says, because he didn't like, *pay* for Billy or anything, but he likes his life and freedom and not being in jail, "I just like--whatever, vouched for you. You can't just fuck off. I don't want to get in trouble for aiding and abetting a fugitive, or whatever."

Steve is using the word *whatever* a lot. It's kind of weird. Everything is kind of weird right now. Billy gives a truly fucking impressive glare for someone who is literally shaking from the cold and says, "You're not my mom, Harrington. It's fucking fine. I won't ditch. Golden boy won't get into trouble with the big bad police."

"It's not fucking fine!" Steve snaps. He feels a little hysterical at the edges, like maybe he should just let Billy Hargrove go, except he doesn't really want to. "It's November in Chicago! I don't know how long you've been here, but it's definitely going to fucking snow and you're in a *tshirt* and those stupid fucking tight pants and I'm not just going to let you, I don't know, freeze to death in a gutter!"

Billy blinks at him, and then laughs--at him, Steve is pretty sure Billy is laughing *at him*, which, the fucking *nerve* Steve should just let him die in a *gutter*--and Billy says, "Thanks for noticing the pants. They're new," he does a little spin thing, so Steve gets a real good look at his ass, and then says, "I'll stay in a shelter. Really, princess, it's fine. I

don't want to be a burden on your perfect fucking city life."

And Steve says, "Oh," because maybe Billy's cold, but the word burden feels more honest than defense mechanism. "No, you're not--listen, Chicago is great and I love it here, but you're clearly not doing too hot--" Steve winces at the bad pun, because Billy is pretty much turning blue now, "And I like, have an apartment, and a fine couch, and you should--just, I don't want to get in trouble, and I also don't want to be responsible for your death from hypothermia--"

"Look at you with the fancy words," Billy interrupts, sneering.

"So you're going to come back to my apartment, and--and--" Steve unzips his winter coat, he's got two sweaters on under it, it's fine, "And you're going to fucking put this on, because it's like, a fifteen minute walk to my apartment, and you're just going to fucking deal with it, ok, Hargrove?"

"Nice apron, princess," Billy smirks, and Steve realizes too late he's still wearing his apron from the coffee shop. He rips it off and balls it up, holding it in his hand. He flushes, but Billy take the coat, and puts it on and zips it up and shoves his hands in his pockets, so Steve takes the win.

"It's this way," he says, and Billy falls into step beside him.

~

Steve doesn't mind the cold, and heat is expensive, so he never turns his up very high. Still, when they walk in the door, even with Steve's nice winter coat and after climbing up all eight million stairs, Billy's still shivering and doesn't take the coat off. Steve turns up the heat and puts water on the stove to boil. He's got one of those drippy ones, but like, a fancy kind, with good coffee. He works in a coffee shop and he likes good coffee. Sue him.

"How do you take your coffee?" he asks, when the silence is too much. He grabs two mugs down from a cabinet. One says, *Hawkins* in big, ugly letters, hand painted. Lucas's little sister made it for him. He's pretty sure she had a crush on him or something, but he likes it, it reminds him of the good parts about home.

“Black,” Billy says, and his arms are still crossed and so he still looks small, and cold, his chin tucked into his chest. It’s not like the jail had been warm, Steve thinks. He wonders how long it’s been since Billy felt warm.

The coffee drips, drips, drips, and the apartment smells good, and homey. Steve fills both mugs with the black coffee, leaves the pot on the stove so it’ll stay warm, and sits at his table with Billy. Billy stares down into his mug, wraps both hands around it. His knuckles are cracked and bloody, too. Steve tips his head back and looks at the ceiling for a little while, just breathing and listening to Billy breathe.

He’s not sure what you’re supposed to do with your high-school former nemesis, who once beat the everloving shit out of you, and whose little sister dates one of your best friends slash sort of little brothers comes back into your life because he’s in some sort of legal trouble, and so he just...stares at the ceiling and listens to Billy breathe because it’s easier than figuring out what’s next.

Except Steve doesn’t like silence, so he says, “So I’m like...responsible for you, or--” he winces, can’t stop the next word, he has to lose this verbal tic that is annoying him, “*whatever*, so what did you. Do?”

Billy is still wearing Steve’s coat and drinking coffee out of a mug with a huge, ugly, hand-painted cat on it. He’s pretty sure Dustin made that one. He is less sure why he has so many hand-painted mugs, especially ones that are that ugly. He doesn’t think he gave it to Billy on purpose, but the subconscious is a weird thing, so maybe he did. There’s another long beat of silence.

“I got in a fucking fight,” Billy says, sullen. “What the fuck do you think happened?”

“I mean, it must have been more than one fight,” Steve says, “The cop said he’s picking you up a lot. So.”

Billy pins him with this look that Steve remembers from when Billy was beating his whole entire skull into the floor. He thinks that this should be what gives him panic attacks, not unexpected shadows on the wall. “Yeah it was more than one fight,” he says, effort in his voice like he’s showing restraint. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

"It is. I vouched for you," Steve argues, wondering why he's so stupid.

Billy stands up so fast he knocks the chair over. The sound echoes and Steve jumps. Billy turns and walks to the door, seems to realize he can't--or shouldn't--leave. He makes a low, angry sound in the back of his throat, slams his fist against the door, then turns and stalks to the window. He goes back to the door, punches it again, and Steve sees the scabs on his knuckles split. Billy does this once, twice, three times more. He's pacing like a caged animal, and Steve, realizing Billy has no way to make an exit, does it for him. He takes his coffee and goes into his bedroom and shuts the door without saying anything.

He listens to Billy pace and punch the walls and make those low, loud angry sounds for a few more minutes before there's silence on the other side of Steve's bedroom door. He doesn't hear the door of his apartment, though, so Billy must have decided to stay.

Eventually, Steve needs to piss, so he leaves his bedroom. Billy is asleep on the couch, curled small as he can get. For such a big guy, he's practically only on one cushion. He's facing out, but has his face tucked into his arm. He's still wearing Steve's winter coat. Steve sighs, but not too loudly, and when he comes back from the bathroom he tosses a blanket over Billy and leaves him a glass of water and a sandwich. He goes back into his room and watches tv. Billy sleeps like, the whole fucking day.

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Steve wakes up to Billy screaming at 3am. Not like, angry shouting or whatever he was doing earlier, but straight up real *screaming*. Steve's out of bed so fast he can't remember getting up, just that all of the sudden he's standing in his living room with a fucking bat. There's no one there except Billy, on the couch, screaming. Steve's neighbors are going to call the cops, probably. Jesus.

"Hargrove!" Steve yells, not getting near him, not a fucking chance. "Fuck. Wake up! It's a fucking dream, wake *up!*" He bangs the bat against the chair that Billy still has not righted, and Billy startles, jumping up off the couch. The blanket Steve had thrown over him

falls into a heap over his feet. He's wearing the coat and his hair is a mess and his eyes are fucking wild, catching the street-light leaking in through Steve's windows. Steve turns the light on and watches Billy come back to himself, the panic bleeding out of him until he's panting in the middle of Steve's living room, looking like a crazy person, but one who is at least--well, calm isn't the right word, Steve thinks, but probably not about to murder anyone.

Too late, Steve realizes he is in nothing but his boxers, and Billy's eyes rake over him. He's got a leer on his face before Steve can ask if he's ok, or something. Steve was definitely going to ask, probably, but he isn't anymore. "Hiya, princess," Billy says, with way too much swagger and aggression for a guy who definitely drooled on Steve's winter coat recently, "You've stayed in shape. Is this the cost of my staying here? You want to fuck?"

It's to distract him, Steve knows, but he can't help himself. Steve's eyes go wide and he feels his whole body flush like his cheeks, "God, fuck you, Hargrove," he says. He's still holding the bat. "Clean up your fucking mess, would you? Jesus. Fuck you!" and Steve doesn't quite manage to slam his bedroom door shut in time to miss Billy go, "I mean, isn't that what I just offered?" and laugh and laugh and laugh.

Once the door is shut, Steve bangs his head back against him. He lets out a mostly quiet, frustrated scream, and climbs back into bed.

He calls out sick when he still hasn't fallen back to sleep an hour and a half later. It's 4:30 and his shift would start at 6, and he just can't. He can't leave Billy alone, he can't work when he's tired like this, and he can't figure out how he feels about any of it, so he calls out sick. His manager is more understanding than he thinks she should be, but he's pretty sure she also thinks it's his sort-of kid brother, and not the fucking psychopath who once almost killed him and four little kids, so he gets why she's being nice.

~

The chair is still on the floor when Steve emerges from his bedroom at 7--dressed in basketball shorts and a warm sweater, not his boxers, thanks very much. He's been awake since 3 in the morning, and

confused for almost twenty three hours now, so he almost doesn't pick it back up. What the fuck, he thinks, staring at it. He's an adult, and not in fucking high school any more, so he doesn't need to play some stupid version of chicken with Billy over this. He picks up the chair and dusts it off, then turns around to find Billy staring at him.

The sandwich is gone, as is the glass of water. Steve's coat is lying carelessly across a chair. Billy's in his t-shirt and his too-tight pants, and both have blood on them. Billy's actually licking his knuckles, which are actively bleeding, and Steve guesses the thump that made him get out of bed wasn't one of the neighbors, but was probably Billy punching something. He feels a little sick.

"For fuck's sake, Hargrove, that's disgusting," he says, and stomps into the bathroom to get his first aid kit. Hopper had gotten him that when he'd helped Steve move in. He hopes nothing in it has expired. He throws it at Billy when he comes back into the room, and Billy doesn't catch it, so it hits him hard in the shoulder. He winces harder than Steve thinks a first-aid kit warrants, and for the first time he wonders if this is what Billy's *face* looks like, what's under that bloody t-shirt?

He doesn't have the energy for this, so he makes another pot of coffee.

Steve watches Billy struggle to clean his knuckles out, then half heartedly try and deal with some of the disgusting dried blood on his face. Billy had slept on *his couch* that dirty and crusty, and Steve cannot handle this. "Go take a fucking shower," he snaps. "There's probably a clean towel in the closet."

Billy doesn't answer, but he does get up and go into the bathroom, and Steve hears the shower running, so that's something. Steve looks around his blissfully empty living room and feels alone and safe in his apartment for the first time since yesterday.

He picks up the phone and calls Dustin. "Steve!" Dustin says in greeting, once his mom had handed over the phone. His voice is so much deeper now. He sounds like he's growing up, and Steve can't handle it, really. It's one of those stupid things that makes him think of lifting Dustin off the ground, the sound of monsters all around

them, Dustin small and tucked against his chest. “What’s up, my man?” Dustin asks, when Steve says nothing like an asshole.

“I need Max’s number?” Steve says, like a question.

“Uh, let me get it,” Dustin says, “I only memorize a finite number of telephone numbers, and her’s is not one. I had to memorize two for you, so,” he’s explaining, and Steve can hear him shuffling around pieces of paper. “Got it! Ok, ready?”

Steve writes down the number and thinks about how glad he is that Dustin just trusts him and doesn’t ask why. “Listen,” Steve says once he’s thanked him, “I need to call her, but--” he thinks about telling Dustin, who is not really a kid anymore, everything, but he doesn’t. He should tell Max first, or her parents, probably? Whoever answers, he guesses. “I have some stuff happening and I’ll fill you and the rest of the party in soon, ok?”

“Are you all right?” Dustin asks, nervous sounding and young to Steve’s ears. He glad he hasn’t told him. It isn’t Dustin’s job to help him sort his shit out.

Steve thinks, *no*, but his mouth says, “Of course, bud. Listen, I’ll call you back, ok? Go to school.”

“Yeah, sure thing,” Dustin says. “Bye, Steve.”

Steve hangs up and stares at the wall for a second, pictures him getting ready for school and Dustin getting picked up by a friend who drives. It’s nearly time for the first bell, but Dustin still answered the phone. They’ll probably all be late. Maybe they’ll get a detention for it. He sighs and tips his head back, staring at his ceiling again.

He likes his life here, but Billy Hargove is in his shower, bringing the weight of Hawkins back with him.

He calls the number Dustin gave him. It rings and rings, finally, “Hello?”

“Hi. Mr.--Mr. Hargove?” Steve guesses. “My name is Steve Harrington. Is Max there?” his parents had taught him a long time ago how to answer phones and make polite calls. Sometimes, when

he isn't thinking, he still answers his own phone, *Hello, this is Steve.*

"Max is on her way to school," the man at the other end of the phone says. "What's your business with my daughter?"

"It's. I'm actually calling about your son?"

"Oh," the word is loaded and comes so slowly that Steve is confused. "What about him?" the whole tone is different, but Steve can't place it.

"I live in Chicago," Steve starts, "We uhm. I went to highschool with Harg--with Billy. I'm from Hawkins," that's obvious, Steve's brain screams at him. "Anyway, I know him a little from school and he was in trouble, so I picked him up from the police station and I'm watching him, or vouching for him, or something," he says finally.

"You want money for the bail?" the man on the other end says, which Steve thinks is a weird first response, and honestly he doesn't sound all that excited to pay it.

"No, uh, I didn't have to pay, I just. I'm just keeping an eye on him, but I thought someone from home should know." There's a long silence on the other end of the phone. "So, now you know, uh, do you want me to...put him on the phone?" Steve's parents would want to talk at him so his mother could fuss and cry and his dad could sound disappointed. Hopper would probably yell. Billy's dad says, "No," and then hangs up.

It's too late to call Dustin back. He'll be on his way to school, so Steve gets up and makes breakfast. He's got eggs, so he makes them both eggs, and toast. He leaves the coffee warming on the stove until he hears the shower turn off, then he pours two mugs. He sets the table, then unsets it because that feels weird, but the eggs and toast are already on plates and he doesn't want to scrape them back into the pan, and it's not like he could put the toast back in the toaster anyway. "God, what the fuck," he mutters to himself before he re-sets the table and grabs a magazine and sits in his own goddamn kitchen slash living room, trying to look normal.

Billy comes back out in his t-shirt and pants. Too late, Steve realizes

he probably should have offered him clothes. “Breakfast is, uh, served,” he says before he gets up and goes into his bedroom. He finds a shirt--sniffs it, clean--and then walks back out. Billy is sitting at the table with a fork in his hand. He has eaten both of their toast and all the eggs. He doesn’t even look a little bit guilty. When he looks at Steve he licks his lips and grins, as close to feral as a person can get, Steve thinks. It’s a challenge. He wants a fight.

“Here,” Steve says, not taking the bait. He can make more eggs. He throws the shirt at Billy and grabs his coffee, walking to the fridge. He’s got a carton of eggs in his hand, and he almost drops them when he turns around. Billy is gingerly trying to take off his own bloody white t-shirt. Steve just stares.

“Holy shit,” he says, finally, “Hargrove, I think you need to go to like, the hospital.”

Billy’s stomach is mottled purple and blue, his ribs are the same. There’s a long, nasty looking cut down his right shoulder--where Steve hit him with the first aid kid, shit whoops,--that probably needs stitches or something. Steve doesn’t know what warrants stitches, but he feels like this cut does.

“Fuck off, princess,” Billy says, but the effect is dulled by the struggling with his shirt. Billy hisses through his teeth and does a complicated move to try and pull the shirt over his head without tugging his shoulder. He makes another small, pained sound, so it must not have worked.

Steve is next to him before he’s really aware of it. He pulls the t-shirt over Billy’s head for him, and suddenly they’re staring at each other, Steve holding Billy’s t-shirt and Billy holding Steve’s. Steve breaks eye contact first, gets the first aid kit and without asking, grips Billy by the shoulder as he tries to clean it out. Billy flinches at the sting, and Steve can’t look at him, can’t breathe, really. Billy is close, and half naked, and Steve is so, so, so aware that this is the first time he’s touched Billy Hargrove since he punched him in the face. Billy mostly holds still, except once, when Steve drops his hand to grab another bandage and accidentally drags his fingers down Billy’s stomach. He can feel Billy’s muscles tense, hear the hitch in his breath. Steve has the strange urge to do it again.

He doesn't, though. Just carefully lifts his hand back up to bandage the cut. He doesn't make eye contact with Billy, a little afraid to know what he might see there. Billy lets Steve sit him at the table, and he holds a mug of coffee in the hand Steve isn't cleaning up. Neither of them speak the whole time, not when Billy winces when Steve grabs his hand wrong, not when Steve knocks over the stupid chair again, not even when Steve curls his fingers under Billy's chin and tilts his head up. He pushes Billy's still damp curls away from his forehead and puts a bandage over a cut there, lets his fingers drag down the side of Billy's cheek. Looking for anything else to bandage, he tells himself. He drags a thumb across Billy's lower lip, still swollen, but not split, and Billy's breath hitches again.

Steve lets go, then, completely and suddenly not hungry. He goes to the fridge to put the eggs away, and when he turns back around, Billy's got the shirt on. He sits there, silent, while Steve takes the plates away and cleans the dishes.

"This is a nice fucking apartment," Billy says, eventually. "I mean, it's a shithole. But it's like, your shithole I guess."

Steve's apartment is *not* a shithole. He has gotten three new rugs since he moved in, to chase away the shadows, to brighten the place up. "Fuck you," he says.

"Did your mommy and daddy pay for it? Do they send you money every month?"

They did, once. They don't anymore. Steve has built a life for himself and he *likes* it, thanks. "Yeah well, some people's parents show they care by spending money on them," Steve snaps, which is true. His parents do care. They love him. "Shit, speaking of parents," he says, and he watches Billy out of the corner of his eye. Steve had expected him to tense, or something, but he doesn't. He relaxes, goes so still and so--the only word Steve can think of is *cool*, that Steve's brain acts before he can stop it, "I got your number from Dustin. I was gonna call Max, but she was already at school, so I talked to your dad and just told him where you are. I didn't want your family to worry."

Max and Billy are not close, but Steve is reasonably sure it got better after the thing with the bat.

“You talked to my dad,” Billy says, and it’s flat and nothing like a question.

“Uh,” Steve says, feeling like he did something wrong. “Yeah? I called him.”

“Man you just can’t ever mind your own fucking *business*, can you Harrington?” Billy asks, still cool, and then he’s up in Steve’s face, and Billy’s face is contorted into something nasty, his lips, and eyebrows, cheeks drawn in and angry. “You fucking nosey little shit,” Billy snarls.

Steve puts his hands up, “Back up,” he says. Billy doesn’t back up, just keeps looming, angry, almost bouncing, the kind of energy that comes right before lightning crackles, only darker. Steve puts a hand in the center of Billy’s chest, “Back the fuck up,” he says again, wondering if Billy could kill him, this time. Billy’s still there, still breathing hard and angry, and the adrenaline hits Steve like a freight train, “Back the fuck *up*,” he shouts, and shoves Billy hard.

Maybe Billy wasn’t expecting it or maybe he was and that’s the point, but it sends Billy flying. He falls backwards across the kitchen and cracks his head against the counter on the way down. He lands laughing, something hooded in his eyes that makes Steve feel like high school again, like a dark night with monsters outside. He’d wanted Billy to leave, that night. Mostly afraid he would kill them before the monsters did, but the monsters were coming, and there wasn’t time--

The adrenaline crests, he feels it rising in his chest, and Steve swallows hard against the taste of bile in his mouth. Billy’s laughing, dragging his hand across his lip that’s split again, bleeding on the fucking floor, and Steve feels like he’s the one that’s been punched in the face. He lands on his knees and gags, choking on whatever’s in his lungs that isn’t air, remembering dust and the squelch of something wrong beneath his feet.

When he looks up, Billy isn’t laughing anymore. He’s staring, openly, still sprawled against the floor where he’d landed. Steve feels his cheeks heat, embarrassed, and he pulls himself back up onto his knees before collapsing against the opposite counter, still breathing

too hard.

“My life was fucking fine,” Steve says, “Before you got here. I don’t live in Hawkins, anymore. I have a job. I have an apartment that I pay my own bills for. I have fucking friends, and I *don’t live in Hawkins anymore*,” he’s breathing hard. “I haven’t felt like that in a long time, and then you fucking come into *my* apartment, after I fucking *save your ass from prison*, and you push me around and you act like a fucking piece of shit,” Steve still feels like he’s gagging on nothing. “I have a job and a life, and you know what? If you want to go sleep in a fucking shelter and you want nothing to do with me, then fucking go!” he’s yelling now. “Take your nightmares and your baggage and the fact that you can’t get your life together and *get. Out.*”

Steve had told Billy to get out once before, poked him in the chest and sneered it. Now he screams it, both of them collapsed against opposite counters, lifetimes away from that moment, but still, Steve is horrified to realize, both of them trapped in it. Billy hauls himself to his feet, “Fuck you,” he says, and then he slams the door to Steve’s apartment on his way out.

Steve doesn’t cry. But it’s a near thing.

~

When Steve finally gets himself off the floor, he drags himself to the phone and he calls Nancy at college. He tells her what’s going on without really telling her. He takes a shower--has to flush the toilet, because Billy didn’t, what a fucking pig. He makes himself a new breakfast. He cleans his couch with febreeze and then cleans his kitchen and then cleans his bedroom and then goes down into the basement to wash anything Billy came near, and then he takes a shower again, and then he feels better.

Sometimes Nancy sends him books, so he reads one of those, and the story is good, even if he doesn’t always get the--she calls them the nuances, the things that matter--but he likes the story, so whatever. Then, when it’s been dark for a few hours, and it’s finally 9pm, he goes to sleep.

It’s 27° in Chicago when he pulls the blankets over his head, but he

does not fucking care.

~

Steve likes this new life he's built for himself. It's been two days since he saw Billy and he's pretty confident now that he isn't going to hear from him again. It's Friday morning, and the cafe is busy, and he loses himself in the sound of steamed milk and the way when it's slammed the back of his neck feels hot. There's a lull after lunch, and he takes the time to clean the counters and the tables, wiping away sometimes imagined dust. He scrubs the floor behind the counter to take away the squelch he sometimes hears when he walks over the mats. He isn't sure it's real, but it feels better for having done it.

He takes his break and walks to a payphone with a handful of quarters once he's sure school is out for the day. He huddles into his winter coat--it still smells like laundry, and feels warmer for it--and takes his gloves off to dial. He listens to the phone ring, and is just starting to feel bummed when-- "Hello?"

"Dustin!" Steve says, can't help the smile, and he hears Dustin exhale loudly through the phone.

"What the fuck man," Dustin is saying, "I thought you might be dead. I really did. Max comes over saying you found *Billy* and then you don't call me back! Nancy doesn't know anything except that you called her *upset* or something and I really thought, this is it, rest in peace Steve-o."

"No such luck," Steve says, "You and the rest of those termites will have to wait to inherit my music collection and my very nice TV for a little while longer."

"Damn," Dustin says, but Steve can tell he's relieved by the way he goes quiet after. "So how's *Billy* the bully?"

"I don't know," Steve admits. "We fought and I kicked him out."

"Did he beat the shit out of you again?"

"Nope, it was more a screaming match. I definitely did the most damage if it comes to physical blows." Of course, it's not like *Billy*

was operating at full physical strength, but Steve can save a little face with the lie.

“Sick,” Dustin says, “Is he in jail? *Max! Your asshole brother is probably in jail!*”

“Fuck Dustin, hold the phone away from your mouth if you’re going to yell like that,” Steve says, rubbing his ear and wincing. “I don’t know. This cop kinda liked him or whatever, so who knows where he is. Is Max there?”

“No, I was just yelling to see if she could hear me from her *house*.” Steve can *hear* Dustin rolling his eyes.

“What, you don’t have the radios anymore?”

“Steve,” Dustin sounds exasperated, “Why would I yell into the radio?”

Steve can think of a number of reasons, ranging from *monster* to *really cute girl*, but he lets it go. “Can I talk to her?”

Dustin, once again, does not move his mouth away from the phone when he yells for Max. “What’s up?” she says at a normal volume.

“Listen, Dustin basically just told you, but Billy is no longer in my...uh, custody? So I didn’t want your dad--I mean, I’m not sure if he like, cares, or whatever, but maybe your mom cares about her kid, and I didn’t want them to call me looking for him, so could you tell them?”

“Step-kid,” Max corrects, “Billy’s her step-kid. Neither of them will look for him, but I’ll tell them.” She pauses, and Steve waits. “If you. See him? Tell him I--” she stops, and Steve waits again, he’s patient not often, and not usually when he’s standing outside and it’s 35°, but for these kids he always waits. “Tell him,” Max repeats, sounding more confident now, “That I hope he’s ok. That I hope he finds something good. Here’s Dustin.”

Max, for all the years he has now known her, has never once been sentimental, but it’s a nice sentiment. He guesses that things had gotten better between her and Billy, even if they’d never be close like

Nancy and Mike.

Steve actually has seen Max a lot, whenever he's home, usually with Dustin or with Lucas, but he's never been to her house. He's never met her parents. He hasn't, in the three years since he moved away from Hawkins, seen Billy since before graduation, until the other day.

Steve remembers, belatedly, that Billy had gotten in a fight. Had thrown a--a microscope through the window of a classroom. He hadn't been invited to walk at graduation. Steve remembers, actually, Hopper coming to the school and dragging a snarling, screaming, kicking Billy out in handcuffs. Billy had been shouting, "Fuck you, don't---fuck you, don't call my dad, just fucking lock me up or whatever, you don't need to fucking--just *let me go!*" and then he'd been pushed into the back of Hopper's truck and Hopper had shut the door, and Steve had stood there with half the school, just staring.

Billy had smiled at them all through the window, pressed his face up against the glass and beamed at them. He licked the window, actually, which had been gross. He was supposed to come back to school, there'd been something like three weeks left, but he never did. Dustin had said something about it, and as Steve waits for Dustin to get back on the phone, he thinks he remembers that Billy broke his arm when he got home.

"Hey there Steve-o," Dustin says, "Everyone says hi, not me. I know I already said that. I guess Max did too."

"Dustin," Steve says. His quarters are gone and he's running out of time. "When Billy--after he got arrested for the science lab, thing, he didn't come back to school. Why didn't he come back to school?"

Dustin is quiet for a few seconds and Steve can feel his time running out. He can picture Dustin thinking, maybe looking at the others for permission before he says, "His dad," slowly, "He was mad. He had to pay for the--for the window. He broke Billy's arm or something." Dustin says this with the weight of being three years older than he was when it happened, like he is just now realizing something that he didn't quite care to know when they were all still angry at Billy, still terrified of him.

“Fuck,” Steve says, and the phone clicks a warning. “My quarters--I gotta go back to work. Bye, kid,” he pauses for a second, then says, “Love you and the rest of the termites. Bye.” He hangs up.

Standing back in the coffee shop, Steve reminds himself that he likes the life he’s built here, likes this world he’s created. He loves his friends, and his parents love him, and Hopper still swings by--for beers now that Steve’s old enough--and he just, he likes the life he’s built here. He wonders if he could have built it without them. He doesn’t think he wants to know.

~

It’s 5pm and dark out when Steve walks back to his building. He almost trips over the person sprawled out near the steps. He feels guilty, instantly, and opens his mouth to apologize before that person--asleep still, because Steve hadn’t actually tripped over them--becomes a little less fuzzy under the streetlight. Steve runs a hand through his hair and then puts his face in his hands, “Fuck,” he mumbles.

He kicks Billy in the side, lightly. “Hargrove,” he hisses. His neighbors are definitely going to call the cops on him this week. Billy doesn’t move. He is still in Steve’s fucking t-shirt, no jacket, *Jesus Christ*. “Hargrove,” he says again, a little louder, kicks a little harder. Billy groans. “Hargrove,” Steve half yells it, and Billy startles awake, falls off the step he was leaning on, lands sprawled out and laughing on the cold Chicago sidewalk.

“Heeeeey, princess,” he says. “King. King Steve. King Steve of Hawkins and now of Chicago, just doing his king Steve thing,” he’s laughing. He’s drunk.

“Why are you here?” Steve asks, knows even before Billy says anything that he will bring him back upstairs.

“Where else’m I gonna go?” Billy answers, and Steve’s stomach twists into knots. He bends over and grabs Billy by the arms, isn’t careful enough of his shoulder apparently, because Billy howls in a sort of angry-pained way.

He stands at the bottom of his eight millions stairs and feels truly fucked, Billy's entire weight is resting against Steve, and Steve can barely keep them both upright. Well. There's really only one option, it's like kill or be killed, only with stairs. Go up the stairs or sleep in the entry.

They make it up one flight, then two, before Steve stumbles and they almost go flying backwards. He's got one arm around Billy's waist as Billy teeters, leaning back, and his other hand is clutching the banister. Steve's stronger now, but Billy's always been bigger, and it's a precarious moment.

"You could drop me," Billy suggests, tipping his whole body back like gravity's too much. It makes him harder to keep from falling. "You could drop me and then *bump, bump, bump, splat*. Problem solved."

With more strength than Steve is sure he has, he gets Billy in front of him, and starts the next flight of stairs. It's easier this way. Steve can use his knees to get Billy's feet up in the right direction, and he can hold Billy around the waist and hold the banister at the same time. Billy's heavy, frozen weight against his chest, and Steve wonders how long he was out in the cold.

"Shit," he says, when they're finally in his apartment. Billy is fully shaking now, just fucking shivering like he's never been warm in his life, and Steve kind of wants to throw up. He pushes Billy into the bedroom, pushes him into his bed, and Billy's laughing again, "I knew you fucking wanted it," he says. He's sprawled on the bed where Steve dropped him, "Fucking come here, then, princess."

He pulls his shirt up, Steve thinks he might be going for seductive, but the effect is dulled by the head to toe shivering and the fact that his stomach is bruised again, somehow worse. Also, Steve is angry, and he's exhausted, and he doesn't care.

"Fuck you," he says, then, "That's not a thing I'm going to do with you. It is a sentiment. *Fuck you.*" He piles all the blankets on top of Billy, and then crawls into bed next to him, because of heat or something. Steve doesn't really know. He also doesn't really want Billy to die alone in his bed. Steve isn't convinced that dying is off the table, and that's scary, but he really doesn't want Billy to have to

do it alone. He'll figure out why later. Probably.

It's a long time before Billy stops shaking. He never gets closer to Steve, which is a relief. He stays a distance away, both of them under Steve's blankets. He stops shaking, and snores a little bit, and when Steve looks over at him Billy's face looks soft in sleep. Steve isn't tired, so he turns on the tv and stares at the news until he falls asleep himself.

~

Steve's alarm should go off at 6 for work, but that's not the sound that wakes him. It's Billy, and he's not quite screaming, but he's doing something close to it, thrashing around under the blankets and making these little afraid sounds. Steve isn't a stranger to nightmares, but it's kind of weird to watch someone else having them. This seems different, it's not like the other night, when Billy had screamed and Steve had hit a chair with a bat. Billy looks wrecked, and desperate, and he sounds so afraid.

He isn't saying anything that Steve understands, and Steve stares at this other human in his bed and weighs his options. He could leave and go sleep on the couch, but that seems weird. He could wake Billy up? But that seems dangerous. Slowly, Steve gets out of bed, he moves to stand next to his door, far from the bed, and says, "Hargrove." He says it four times before he opens his bedroom door and then slams it shut. The sound is almost loud enough to make Steve jump, but it catapults Billy out of bed. Steve opens the door again, ready to slam it shut between them if-if what? The person he has now let into his house twice tries to *murder him?* Awesome, that's fucking fantastic--but Billy doesn't move. He just stands there next to Steve's bed, shaking, and then puts his back against the wall and sits down.

"Hargrove?" Steve tries, still standing near the door. Billy's chest is heaving. "Hargrove?" Steve tries again. A few too many minutes of silence pass. Finally, "Billy?" and then Steve takes a few steps into the room.

Billy throws a hand up, "Don't," he says, still breathing too hard, "Don't move. Don't come near me. Don't fucking touch me just," a

few heavy breaths, “Don’t.”

Steve backs up again until his back hits the opposite wall and then he sits down all at once, crashing to the floor. It hadn’t sounded like a threat, more like Billy felt threatened and Steve gets that. He likes to have people he knows near him when he wakes up from nightmares, but he can understand why Billy wouldn’t. It’s a long time before Billy speaks or moves. “I’ll. Thanks.” He says, sharp and sudden. “I’ll go to the couch.” He stands up.

Steve’s brain and his mouth need to have a little sit down, because Steve fucking hears himself say, “Nonsense,” like he’s his *mother* and also like he’s *stupid*, “We were fine. The couch is lumpy. This way I can wake you up if you have another n--if you need me to wake you up.”

Then, like it’s no big deal, Steve takes off his pants--but leaves his shirt on--and climbs back into his own bed and curls up under the covers and pretends he has the super ability to immediately fall asleep. Billy, he figures, could still kill him, but he’s starting to think that won’t happen.

It’s a really long time before Steve hears Billy move and feels the weight of someone else on his mattress. Honestly, he’d almost fallen asleep by then.

~

At 6am, when his alarm goes off, Billy is much closer to Steve. Plastered to him is actually probably the right word, Billy’s back is pressed up against Steve’s. Steve can feel Billy’s *toes* at his *ankles* and it’s really fucking weird. Steve turns off his alarm, climbs out of bed, and leaves a note on his pillow. This is something Nancy had done for him, *after*, when they weren’t in love, but couldn’t sleep alone, when Jonathan was always doing something downstairs, and eventually Nancy would join him there. She would leave him a note so he wouldn’t panic when he woke up. Steve leaves:

I’m at work. Don’t go outside without a fucking jacket. Dipshit. I’ll be home at 5.

Steve gets ready for work very quietly. He leaves his winter coat where Billy can see it just in case. Steve knows what it's like to feel trapped.

~

Billy does not go back to sleeping on the couch. It turns out he has nightmares every night, which is both irritating and perplexing. As far as Steve knows, Billy has never had to fight any monsters, so he can't figure out what's so fucking bad that Billy needs to torment him every night by waking up and freaking out. Billy never comes close to hurting him or hitting him--if he had there would definitely be no bed sharing, but when Steve comes home from work, Billy's almost always napping on the couch. It doesn't make him look any less exhausted.

Steve calls Dustin, who fills Max in with updates. Steve hasn't given Billy the message from her, because the last time he'd brought up Billy's family that had ended *spectacularly* for everyone involved.

They're eating dinner one night--Billy had heated up cans of soup--and they're watching a shitty scary movie, when Billy says, "Do you talk to my dad?" and it isn't hopeful, but it isn't--not.

"No," Steve says, "Not since. The one time. I talk to Dustin and he keeps Max updated." Steve pauses, weighs his options. "She hopes you're ok," he says finally. "She hopes you find something good."

Billy laughs, but it scares Steve less. Billy laughs when he's feeling shit he doesn't want to deal with, so Steve lets him and slurps his soup and watches the movie. Billy at least flushes the toilet now. They're making progress.

~

Steve gets home from work one night and Billy isn't there. Steve eats dinner and watches two movies. Billy isn't there. Steve stays up later than he should, slams shit around his kitchen, and still, Billy isn't there. He took the coat, so there's that, Steve supposes, but it's not much.

Billy comes home close to 3am, and Steve wonders, as he's feeling full of rage and storming down the stairs to let Billy into the building, when he decided he could call this--even in his own internal monologue--Billy's home. He rips the door open, and Billy's wearing the coat and his nose is bleeding, and he reeks like booze and cigarettes.

"For fucks sake," Steve snaps. He turns around and stomps back up the stairs, but he listens to make sure Billy's following. "God, what is fucking wrong with you." He opens the door to the apartment, pushes Billy inside. "You're a fucking mess, jesus," he keeps saying, and Billy is staring at him, and Steve is so angry and Billy just doesn't say anything.

Steve gets up in Billy's face, pushes him by his shoulders until his back is up against the wall, shoves his shoulders again. "What's wrong with you?" he asks again, "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he's almost shouting, and he wonders when this became *him* looking for a fight, but Billy just looks away, turns his whole head away from Steve and presses his other cheek into the wall and stops breathing. Steve lets go and backs up, almost trips over his own feet, confused and still angry. "Go to bed," he says, running a hand through his hair. "Fuck, Billy. Fucking go to bed!"

"Yeah," Billy says, mumbling something else.

"What was that?" Steve asks, deflated and tired, but not soft enough, still with a mean edge.

Billy's head jerks up, and even though Steve's across the room, Billy stays pinned against the wall. "Yes sir," he sneers, all venom, and then he throws himself off the wall and into the bedroom. Steve's alarm is going to go off in two hours, but he drops down onto the couch. He doesn't actually go back into the room for a long time.

~

It's a month before they hear from the cop again. Three weeks until Christmas, and Steve's been starting to wonder what he's supposed to do with Billy for like, the holidays. Billy doesn't really disappear after that one night, and they never talk about it, but he thinks it would be

weird to just bring him back to Hawkins. The cop calls, though, on a Wednesday, and that changes things.

“He’s still there?” the cop says, sounding so honestly surprised that Steve is a little offended.

“Yeah,” he says, “We’re. Fine?”

“Shit,” the cop says, “I honestly--I didn’t expect he’d stick around that long. That’s really good.”

“Does he have a trial or something?” Steve asks. Billy’s staring at him so Steve covers the mouthpiece of the phone and mouths *it’s the cop*, and Billy rolls his eyes and flips him off. He knocks the chair over, too, grinning at Steve and licking his lips. Steve thinks about strangling himself with the chord of the phone.

“Not exactly,” the cop says slowly, “Listen, I pulled some strings like I said, so no jail time I honestly--I didn’t expect him to be around. He’s fine now, for now. He just--no more bar fights and no more trespassing, and no more sleeping with married women and then trying to fight their husbands in their homes.” That’s gross and Steve makes a face at Billy even though Billy can’t hear.

“Sure,” Steve says, “Ok. Thanks officer, uh, happy...holidays, or whatever,” and then he hangs up because he’s *so embarrassed* by what a *child* he still is. He looks up at Billy, “So you’re off the hook, I guess.”

They’ve been sharing an apartment, meals, and a bed for a little over a month, and that’s kind of weird to think about like that, so Steve doesn’t, not really, but they’ve also just lost the reason for it to be happening. Billy goes from making faces at him to staring down into his mug of coffee. Every inch of him is tense. When he does look up, he’s a little paler. He looks wrung out, all of the sudden.

“I’ll get out of your hair,” Billy says, and stands up hard enough to flip the chair over *again*, and Steve rolls his eyes, because that’s what he does now, when Billy flips the chair over, only a few seconds later Billy comes out of the bedroom with a duffel bag and he just...walks out. Like, straight up leaves, and Steve stands staring at the closed

door for a long time after.

~

A week passes, and then two. Steve packs to go home for the holidays and catches a flight back. Nancy, home for longer from college, picks him up at the airport. He finally tells her about Billy. All of it. The sleeping together-- "Not like *that*, Nancy, christ" and she says, "Well it is more forward thinking now, of course I wouldn't judge you--I have *friends* who--" and she's so well meaning that he drops it. He tells her a little about the panic attacks, and how Billy makes him feel, like he's all mixed up. He tells her about Billy leaving, how he hasn't heard a thing from him since. He closes his eyes and leans his head against her car window and says, "What if he's dead, Nance?"

"He's made it this far," she reminds him. She's right, he guesses.

Steve comes back to Hawkins a few times a year, but it never gets any easier. He always slinks down low when he drives through town, like he's afraid someone will see him. Nancy pulls up to his house and it takes him a couple of seconds to coordinate his body and brain so that he can get out of her car. He kisses her cheek. "I'll see you tonight for dinner?" he asks, because they're all going to the Byers's house to eat. It is the part he most looks forward to, seeing this more-real family he's built.

Of course, Dustin doesn't like to wait. Especially not hours until dinner. He's sitting on Steve's bed when Steve walks in. Dustin is too tall, now, it's unreal, and his voice is low, but his hair's still curly and he gives Steve a giant hug and then doesn't shut up until Steve agrees they'll drive to dinner together. It's nice to be home, he supposes.

A few hours later, at the Byers's house, Max gives him significant looks over the table, but they're never alone long enough to say whatever it is she has to say. "I wanted to war--" she starts, but then Lucas is there, or Dustin, or El, or Mike, or Hopper, and she shuts her mouth and won't say another thing.

They sing popular songs and dance, and Steve feels ridiculous and also happy and warm. He is sad to leave at the end of the night. He and Max never get a minute, "I'll tell you tomorrow," she says into

his ear when they hug, and then he and Dustin get into the car he borrowed from his parents.

Dustin wants to sleep over, but Steve makes him go home. “I’m tired, bud,” he says, yawning for affect. “Tomorrow night, ok?” The night had been as close to perfect as nights in Hawkins get, but Steve feels the weight of Hawkins on him, and he needs a minute or he’s going to shatter, he can feel it. Besides, if he doesn’t get a minute alone tonight, there’s no way he’ll be able to talk to Max tomorrow without someone else around.

He plays music too loud on the drive home and rolls the windows down even though it’s frozen. It reminds him of being in high school, before monsters, when it was him and Nancy being--whatever they were. The air rushes in, and the shadows only make him sink down a little lower. He turns the music down and rolls the windows up when he gets back toward his house, though, an old habit. He doesn’t want to disturb the neighbors. He pauses at the bottom of the driveway to look up at his house, still huge and imposing. It looms dark in the distance; his parents aren’t back from wherever. He’s been home for hours and still hasn’t seen them. He files that feeling into another part of his chest to deal with later, when he feels more ready.

It’s only when he gets closer that he sees the strange orange light hovering a little off the ground. His stomach is in his throat, he feels like he can’t breathe, the shadows--but then, no, it’s person shaped. Someone is smoking. He lets his breath all out in a rush and parks. He’s going to kill Dustin for scaring him, but also for smoking. It’s a bad fucking habit.

He’s worked himself up into a real frenzy, a good fucking lecture, when he realizes, standing about a foot away, that the person isn’t Dustin. “Billy,” he says, soft and surprised.

“Princess,” Billy greets, and his voice is tight and raspy. Steve thinks this shouldn’t be familiar, but it is.

“Come on,” he says, and leaves the door open behind him. He turns on every light switch he passes by, big houses make for a lot of shadows, and by the time they’re in the kitchen the house is so bright it must look like a beacon from the bottom of the driveway. Steve

doesn't care. He turns on one last light before he leans himself against the counter, finally looking at Billy.

Billy hops up to sit on the island. He's still smoking, Steve'll get blamed for that later, but it's his face more than the cigarette that distracts Steve. "You like it?" Billy asks when he sees Steve staring. "A welcome home present, I thought, for the holidays, you know, I'd come home. Merry fucking Christmas, right?" He turns his head so Steve can really see the bruises on his face, his black eye. This, Steve thinks, is what Max had wanted to warn him about. Billy being back in Hawkins. "And then I thought, I can't be in this fucking house, I'll break something, and I don't--" Billy stops, "I am trying not do that anymore," Billy's voice sounds ragged now, and it cracks, but Steve's not going to say anything about it if Billy isn't, "And I can't fucking sleep. I haven't slept in weeks."

The *without you* is implied, but Steve hears it just before he hears the rushing in his ears. He can't breathe. Billy is staring at him, and Steve is staring back, and then Steve turns away, because he's going to get some vegetables out of the fridge. They don't have peas, but they do have corn, Steve thinks, because his dad doesn't like peas. You use frozen vegetables for bruising. It helps. He's got a hand in the freezer when he hears it, the way Billy's breath seems to shudder out of him, the crack in his voice that is not quite a sob, but getting closer to it when he says, "Well fuck you too, then."

Steve turns around with a bag of frozen corn in his hand. "What?" he snaps, then regrets snapping, because Billy doesn't just *sound* wrecked like that, he *looks* it, and his face and the bruising looks like it fucking hurts.

"I'll get the fuck out," Billy says, vicious. He's going to launch himself off the counter. "Get out of your hair." He's going to walk out of Steve's house. If he does that, Steve knows, he will never walk back in.

"Fuck," Steve says, and Billy stops moving. Steve walks to where Billy's sitting on his mother's island. He takes the cigarette away and puts it out right there, like the island is an ashtray, and his mother will hate it, but Steve thinks Billy might like it. He's still got the bag of corn in his hand, and he's thinking he wants to put it on Billy's

face to help the bruises go down, but he puts the corn down next to the cigarette, and puts his hand on Billy's face instead.

There is a whole moment when neither of them breathe, "I don't think I want you to get out of my hair," Steve says, and it is the *least* sexy thing he has ever said in his *entire life*, but it works, because Billy leans over to press his forehead against Steve's, and Steve slides his hand around to the back of Billy's head, tangles his fingers in curls, pulls, just a little, for a better angle.

Billy is sitting on the kitchen island in his house in Hawkins when Steve finally figures out the knot in his stomach. Steve kisses him, a hand holding Billy's head where he wants it, and it's all teeth and tongue, sloppy and desperate, and Steve *wants* that, but he doesn't want *that*, so he slows it down, slides his tongue over Billy's lower lip--swollen, almost but not quite split--like he did his thumb all those weeks ago.

He feels Billy exhale, lean into it like he isn't quite sure. "Let's fucking go to bed," Steve says, because Billy yawns. Billy laughs, and it almost seems real.

Steve doesn't turn the lights off, doesn't put the cigarette in the trash, doesn't put the corn away. He can figure that out tomorrow.

When they're both in his dark bedroom, breathing hard and a little sweaty, Steve presses his forehead against Billy's in the dark, and Billy's tense all of the sudden, like he's afraid of something. There aren't any shadows in the room, though. "You should stay for Christmas," he says. "Don't go back to your dad's house." Billy's breathing stutters out, and Steve says, "And then, I don't know. Maybe come back home--to--to Chicago, or whatever?"

Steve likes the life he's built for himself, but he thinks he could do better.

2. II

Summary for the Chapter:

A collection of codas from Billy's perspective.
Hawkins to Chicago and back again.

Notes for the Chapter:

There are much more explicit descriptions of Billy's relationship with his father in this chapter, so I've updated the tags accordingly.

"Tonight I am all in flames . . .
I am sorry I carried my disturbed mood to you.
I don't like to do that, yet you dissolved it."

-Anaïs Nin

Cop A is a dick. Billy knows this with the kind of half-lucid certainty that comes when you've been hit in the head a few many times, when you've lost a fight. He knows it by the weight of the hand on his shoulder, the squeeze where Cop A must know there's a wound because there's blood on his t-shirt. Billy hisses through his teeth and laughs, but doesn't whine or moan or flinch away. He doesn't like to give people the fucking pleasure.

Cop B, though, Cop B is chill. She's calm, and her eyes are hard, but in a nice way, like she's sizing him up, like she isn't finding him wanting.

Billy is on the floor of the bedroom of a house he doesn't belong in. Billy is going to jail, probably, for real this time. It's--fine. Everything is fine. He tips his head back against the wall and grins at Cop A, angry, looking for a fight.

He licks his split lip, and there's blood in his mouth and on his teeth, so he keeps smiling, wide and sharp. "It's not my fault," he tells Cop A blithely, "That *that* guy couldn't give it to his wife right."

Billy's been doing this for a while, on and off. It's mostly a good fuck

and a near escape, sliding out the window and down the fire escape, laughing from the sidewalk below as the husband throws things at him. Billy likes the rush of it all, and when the guy's away for the weekend or on business, he can usually get a warm place to sleep. The beds these people own are unreal, soft and huge. Billy doesn't even realize, usually, that there's someone else in them. The sex is good and the beds are great, and the adrenaline rush when some guy walks in his own front door and sees his wife's bra right there in the hallway--there's nothing like it.

He miscalculated this time, and that's fine. This guy was fast, and he was big. There'd been a moment where Billy had been on his back on the floor, the guy above him, fist raised, where he remembered the positions reversed. That had thrown him. Billy doesn't think about Hawkins unless he has to. Billy doesn't think about Steve Harrington ever.

Then the woman had been crying and screaming, and calling 911, and saying things like, *he's going to kill him*, and Billy, nose bleeding, lip split, ribs *aching* had thought, hey, maybe, fuck, and then the guy had hauled him up and thrown him back down, and Billy, who had been mostly silent for the whole thing except occasionally laughing, had bumped against one of those ugly, but practical glass dresser toppers that Susan had always liked and his dad had always shattered, and he'd broken it with his fucking shoulder. He'd howled, then, really more of a scream, and gone down clutching where the glass had sliced him.

So now he's on the floor of this house, and they've mostly patched him up--he's not bleeding from his shoulder, anyway, so he figures he isn't going to die, looking at Cop A, who is a dick, and Cop B, who's pretty chill, and wondering what happens next. Billy doesn't usually wonder what happens next. He's worked hard to make sure that the decision is his, every single time, and he doesn't like that it's in someone else's hands.

Cop A stalks out of the room, tugging at his belt in a way Billy thinks must make him feel important. He's talking about going to *interview the victims*, and Billy doesn't much like the word victim, but he reminds the cop as he walks away, "I'm the one bleeding, asshole," and the cop says, "Shut the fuck up you piece of shit kid," and Billy

lets his head thump back against the wall and grins a big grin with blood all in his teeth at Cop B, because he doesn't really have an answer for that.

She crouches down in front of him. "How old are you, again, Billy?" she asks.

He'd thought she'd looked familiar. "Man, you just can't stop following me around," he says, "What, you want to know what these nice rich ladies are getting?"

The cop rolls her eyes. "Listen," she says, "Shut up. I said how old are you again?"

"Twenty-one," he answers, turns his head to the side and spits blood on their nice carpet.

She pinches the bridge of her nose in a way that kind of, if he were really thinking hard about it, reminds him of someone he chooses not to place. "Do you know anyone in Chicago?" she holds up a finger the second he opens his mouth, "Anyone respectable. Who could vouch for you. Who I could believe wasn't going to set you free to keep--" she stops and looks around the room, the sheets torn off the bed, the shattered pieces of the dresser topper, the smudged brown and drying trail of blood, the heap of Billy leaning against the wall like he wants to be there and not like he isn't sure he could get up, "--keep doing all this to yourself."

Billy weighs his options. He's got a smart-ass response to her, he always has one of those on deck, but he's reckless, not a fucking idiot. He tips his head back against the wall and drops his shoulders, coming down off the adrenaline and suddenly acutely aware of every wrecked and broken inch of his skin and bones. "Yeah," he says, "Steve Harrington."

Cop B stands up, "You gotta get up now, kid," she says. "We're going to the station, and then I'm going to find him, and he's going to take you home."

And Billy, who is really trying not to be an asshole, and whose ribs hurt way too much to commit to it, can't help it. He laughs.

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After the thing with the bat, on the floor of the Byers's house, things with Max don't get perfect. They do get better, on his end. There's a part of him that knows the sort of hooded way she looks at him, the way she leans up against the passenger door of his car, so much space between them. The way that sometimes she'll come after him, all attitude and bright, angry eyes, and then pull herself back, away. He knows and understands all those moves. He's done them himself. It'll be a long time before he's able to really apologize for doing that to her. After the thing with the bat, it isn't like Billy isn't still *angry* and *wrong* and also, additionally now, *humiliated*, he's just now also a little scared of his little step-sister. Also a little sorry, but that's the really small part, the dormant one, that one'll come later.

On the Thursday he stops going to school, Billy has biology third period, just before lunch. When he doesn't have other shit to do around town--he doesn't much, these days--he always goes to school. There's no point in staying home, and when he misses too much they call his dad. He kind of likes school anyway, even some of the class stuff. Also, at school there's girls to meet up with under the bleachers or in the library between stacks of books, and there's basketball practice, and there's some semblance of friends. There's Steve Harrington, too, but unless he absolutely fucking has to, Billy does not speak to him. If there's another option, he doesn't pass the ball to him. He doesn't even try to get the ball from him, or block a shot. He's thrown a few games that way, not because he wanted to throw them, but because he's pretty sure Steve counts in Max's friends--which is weird, by the way--and he's not going to mess with that. He got the message.

So he's in biology, looking forward to dissecting something, when Tommy looks up at him and says, "That Henderson kid is so fucking weird."

Billy had been almost listening to the teacher. Now he's looking at Tommy. "Yeah, and?" he says, all contempt and disinterest.

"And I heard he's gonna have a shitton of money in that backpack tomorrow because him and the rest of the freaks are going to buy something from the nerd store," Tommy says, and then waits. Billy

just looks at him. Tommy rolls his eyes. “So we’re going to fucking take it, and then we can go blow it on booze or something.”

“We’re not going to do that,” Billy says simply, and turns back to the teacher.

“Uh, who fucking says we’re not?”

“I do,” Billy answers, turns to Tommy and feels anger unfurl slowly in his stomach. “I said you’re not going to do it.”

Tommy laughs at him. He actually laughs. “You won’t even go near fucking *Harrington*, you’re so fucked up about whatever happened in the fall. You think we don’t see it? You beat his face in and now you’re *scared* of him?” Tommy laughs again. “We’re going to take that little freak’s money, and then if you want in you can fucking come have fun with us after. We’re doing him a favor, he doesn’t need any of that nerd shit. Maybe he’ll grow up normal.”

Billy doesn’t think that *I’m not afraid of Steve, I’m afraid of my kid sister* is a very convincing argument, so he doesn’t bother to explain it. He’s also never needed a convincing argument. He said no. Tommy isn’t going to disobey that particular command, but Billy doesn’t need to use words to get him to understand that. Billy shifts, and he kicks the stool Tommy is sitting in over. Stool and Tommy make a loud sound when they both hit the floor, and the room goes silent. “I said no,” Billy says, leaning over close to Tommy.

Tommy actually tries to fight back, which is sweet and a little pathetic, but Billy’s bigger, and he’s stronger, and--at the end of the day, and perhaps most importantly--he’s meaner. He’s done this before. He isn’t afraid to fuck someone up. He throws Tommy back on the floor when Tommy gets up, but Tommy gets in a good swing, catches Billy across the cheek, and tries to scramble backwards. Billy isn’t really thinking when he picks up the microscope, it’s just that Tommy is actually trying to *run away* and he hasn’t agreed to leave Dustin alone, why does Billy even know that kid’s first name, and security is running into the classroom, so he grabs the microscope and *hurls it*, and he’s aiming for Tommy, but it goes through the window instead.

Even Billy goes silent at that, staring at the shattered glass and rubbing his bruised cheek. “Get him out,” the teacher says, all still and quiet rage at the front of the classroom. Billy kind of goes with them, at first, makes it all the way to the classroom door before he sees Hopper and kind of connects the dots.

“No,” he says, and doesn’t really think about it. “No fucking way,” he holds both hands up and takes a step back into the classroom, but they probably think he’s crazy, and there are kids in there, so security is blocking him. Billy feels trapped, all of the sudden, and wild with it. “No,” he says again, “Get the fuck away from me.”

“Billy,” the chief says, “Hey, kid,” and he’s got kind of nice eyes and seems like he’s probably pretty chill, “You need to come with me.” Hopper looks prepared to wait him out, honestly, that’s what Billy’s thinking. There’s security, and there’s Hopper, but Hopper keeps his distance and has both hands where Billy can see them. Billy’s not thinking super clearly, but he notices that.

Billy doesn’t like to be pushed or shoved, doesn’t like it when he’s up against the wall, and Billy kind of thinks, in a half-lucid way, that Hopper is going to wait him out. Isn’t going to slam him into a wall. He kind of wonders, in that same way, how Hopper can know that’s the best way to do it.

School security is not on the same page as Hopper, apparently, because as Billy’s sort of coming back to himself, hearing words and seeing faces through the hot rush of anger, he’s also dropping his shoulders. The two school officers grab him, slam him into the wall and then there’s cuffs around his wrists and they shove him at Hopper. There’s a deputy behind him, who sort of reaches out, and Hopper says, “No,” and shoulders the other dude out of the way. He grabs Billy’s arms, but it’s not--it doesn’t hurt, he’s not pulling, not until Billy starts to kick and thrash and scream, then Hopper’s mostly dragging him out of the school.

He doesn’t let anyone else help him though, and later Billy will be impressed by that, will even be a little grateful for it.

Billy’s almost the whole way through the lobby, still fighting Hopper’s grip, when he connects the final dots, because someone

behind Hopper is saying into a radio, “Ok, and can you get this kid’s family on the phone? Christ.”

“No,” Billy says, and then he’s really screaming. “No fuck you, no you can just--just fucking lock me up. You don’t--fuck you, don’t call my dad, just let--just fucking *let me go*,” and he can feel that he’s absolutely fucking lost it. He thinks he’s shaking, but he also feels numb, and angry, and everything else kind of fades once Hopper gets him in the back of his truck and slams the door shut.

Billy looks out the window as Hopper talks quickly to security and the principal, and it looks like the whole entire school has spilled out behind them. Most are talking and laughing, pointing. He grins, bloody and wide, and licks a strip up the window. “That’s disgusting,” Hopper says, sliding into his car. He peers at Billy in the backseat and pinches the bridge of his nose. “There’s been some nasty people back there,” and Billy just shrugs.

Out the window, he sees Steve Harrington, watching. There’s people around him, and they’re pointing and motioning to each other, but Harrington just kind of stares. It’s the last time Billy will see the school, or Steve Harrington, for a long fucking time.

His dad picks him up from the station. He signs some forms and talks politely with Hopper. He apologizes for the mess and for the confusion, for Billy’s outburst. He doesn’t speak to Billy, who is slumped and sullen in a chair in the corner of Hopper’s office. They didn’t put him in a cell, which a few of the other police at the station had been less than thrilled about. Hopper had waved them off. “He’s going in my office,” he said. “I’ll be there. Enough.” And so together they had waited for Billy’s dad to come pick him up.

Billy and his dad make it all the way back to the house without saying anything to each other. They’re inside, standing in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room. Susan’s left the door to the cellar open, which means she’s probably doing some weird sort of-canning shit. She likes to can things, like she’s saving up for the apocalypse, but she doesn’t like to set things she’s carrying down, so she leaves the door open when she has to make trips. It drives Billy crazy, but he’d never say anything to her. Not to fucking Susan.

“Dad--” Billy starts.

“What did I say to you?” his dad says, “About being better here? About *respect* and *responsibility*?” Billy opens his mouth to answer, but his dad says, “I am not done, do not interrupt me,” and Billy snaps his mouth shut. “Your school called me before I went to the police station. I need to pay for the microscope. And the window. Do you have any idea how expensive that’s going to be?”

There’s a sort of rushing in Billy’s ears. He shakes his head. Feels angry and helpless and *angry* all at once. “Answer me in words,” his dad says, close all of the sudden. The first punch is sharp, catches him across the cheek, and Billy plants his feet. The second one is hard, snaps his head to the side, sends him reeling and stumbling, and down the stairs. *Bump, bump, bump, splat* he hears as he falls into the cellar. He doesn’t scream. He’s trying not to cry. His arm hurts, he’s never hurt this bad in his life, he thinks he’s going to fucking die from the pain, thinks he might fucking want to.

When he drags himself back to the top of the stairs, his dad is gone. Billy drives himself to the hospital.

He walks out of the--whatever places in the hospital where doctors do shit are called--in a cast a few hours later, and Susan and Max are in the waiting room. Max looks sullen and a little wide-eyed when she sees him. Susan brings a hand to her mouth, walks toward him, looks a little shocked herself.

Billy meets them halfway across the room, relieved that there’s someone here to figure out the bills. “My arm is broken,” he tells her. They’ve also patched up what they called *lacerations* on his face. “I told them everything,” he’s looking somewhere past her right ear, at a poster on the hospital wall. He can’t look her in the face. He thinks that if he does, maybe he’ll start crying. He can feel Max standing next to him now, feel her wide eyes on him. Susan breathes in sharply, but Billy continues, “How I was up on the roof trying to get drunk and throw shit at squirrels coming to the house. Blow off steam after today. How I fell.” Susan exhales and sort of pats his shoulder, then walks to the counter.

Billy watches her pull out her purse and he looks at his kid sister. He

knows his eyes are red, and his face is beat up, and he feels hurt and small and angry, but all he says to Max is, “Tommy’s going to try and take Dustin’s money tomorrow.”

He drives himself home, too. There’s three weeks left until graduation. They get a call that Billy won’t be allowed to walk, too unpredictable, but they’ll mail him his certificate.

Billy, who kind of liked school when he had nothing better to do, doesn’t go back.

~

He hears from Max about a month and a half after later that Steve Harrington left Hawkins. He’s still in the cast, but it’ll be off soon. They’re in the kitchen and his dad and Susan are out for dinner, so Billy is making spaghetti, because he’d been told to make sure Max eats something and these days Billy mostly just does what he’s told. He can’t see the fucking point anymore.

“Where?” he asks her, trying to drain the pasta with one hand. Max comes around him and grabs the pot, “Careful,” he says, kind of dumbly, “It’s hot.”

She pins him with a withering stare, “I know, asshole.” He goes to get the sauce. “Chicago, I think. He called Dustin who was pretty broken up about it. I don’t know though,” Max shrugs, “Seems to make sense to me. He wasn’t going to college and I feel like,” she looks around the kitchen and out the window, “Why’s anyone going to want to stay *here*?” There’s more behind her words than just how much Hawkins *sucks*, but they don’t talk really, and so Billy doesn’t ask. Sometimes she jumps at weird sounds, and she likes to keep more lights on than he thinks is necessary, but whatever. Kids are weird.

They eat dinner and Susan and his dad don’t get home until late, but Billy stays in. High school big shots are less in demand after graduation, and the cast on his arm makes it difficult to fight or to fuck. He pretends he doesn’t know Max’s weird friends come over and he bangs on her closed door when he hears the car in the driveway. They’re not quiet when they climb out her window, but she’s in her room alone and so is he when Susan comes in to check on

them both, so that's fucking fine. He didn't see them anyway, so it's almost like he doesn't know they were here.

~

Billy is sitting in the diner in Hawkins when someone slides into the booth across from him. Billy's got one of those stupid travel guidebooks open, and a map, he's trying to learn something about Chicago.

It's Hopper, "How's your arm?" he asks, and orders a coffee when the waitress appears.

"I get the cast off next week," Billy says, because Hopper has appeared a few times in the nine weeks since the thing at the school, and he doesn't really leave until he gets whatever he's looking for out of the conversation. It's so fucking annoying, but also kind of nice or whatever. Billy hates himself a little bit for thinking it. He stares down at the guidebook, trying to be rude so that Hopper gets the point and leaves.

"Thinking of going to Chicago?" Hopper asks instead, and then the waitress is back and Hopper orders *breakfast* so he's clearly not leaving. "There's a lot of that going around. You want to move there?"

"I don't know," Billy says, "Maybe."

Hopper nods and is silent while he waits for his breakfast. The food comes and Hopper's crunching on a piece of bacon when he says, "You need money for that. You got money, Billy?"

Billy shrugs, still not looking up, still paging through the guidebook. "Some."

"Ok, well here's the deal. I have to go back out to Chicago to help Steve--Harrington, you remember him, right?" and Billy wonders if that's a fucking joke, but when he looks up to see, Hopper's face is completely straight, so he's not sure, "I'll help you sell your car--don't look at me like that, you need money to move and you don't need a car--and I'll drive you out there. You get your cast off next week,

right? Let's say two weeks we leave."

Billy stares at him for a solid, silent minute, then says, "I need to piss," and he doesn't exactly run away to the bathroom, but it's pretty close.

When he gets back, Hopper is gone, but there's a napkin with a phone number and the word *car* underlined and circled on it, plus a date a little over two weeks from now. Billy's still staring at it when the waitress brings him a plate of eggs and bacon he didn't order. "It's from the chief," she says, sort of kindly even though Billy knows she doesn't like him, "Enjoy."

Billy eats it because he's hungry, and he stares at the napkin until he's got all that shit memorized, and then he leaves.

He sells his car, and packs, and tells his dad he's leaving. "Fine," his dad says, "Max is old enough she doesn't need someone to watch her," and then he turns back to the tv. There's an embarrassing minute where Billy actually just stares at him, like he's waiting for something else, but his dad doesn't look back up so Billy goes back into his room to finish packing.

There's a knock at the door, and when he opens it, Max is on the other side, blinking at him with big, bright eyes. "Uh," she says, kind of soft and thoughtful, and it's not a real sentence, but Billy gets the sentiment. "You too," he says, and then she walks away and Billy shuts the door. His cast is off. He lets Hopper drive him to Chicago.

He didn't say thank you, he realizes a few hours after he gets there. Chicago is hot, and the sun is still out, and Billy had grabbed his bags and his money and slipped away while Hopper was in a gas station. He almost regrets it. Billy is grateful, even though he's still trying to work out what it means to feel grateful and not angry, but he doesn't want Hopper to help him get an apartment, or to help him move in. Hopper hasn't really talked about Harrington, but Billy is pretty sure that's what he'd done for him. Billy doesn't want that. He doesn't have anything back in Hawkins to hold on to. So he slinks away when Hopper is in a gas station, grateful, and also needing a clean break.

~

Billy had known that Chicago wouldn't make him a good person. It had been tougher to experience it. The random arrests, his own fucking stupidity, how much of an asshole he still is. He hates himself, a little. Hates his dad, a lot. Feels like every day he walks a fine line between thinking all this was done to him, and thinking that he did some of it to himself. He wonders sometimes, if it would have been different, if Susan had put her foot down about him the way she'd had about Max, or if that was even too late for him. Billy still feels angry all the time, and sometimes he just feels sick to his stomach, and sometimes he just needs to hit something.

So he gets to know Cop B because she keeps picking him up, and is kind of chill, and she never shoves him around, and he gives her Steve Harrington's name, and he wakes up in the early evening on a dark, November day in Chicago on Steve Harrington's couch. He eats the sandwich that Harrington made for him and looks at the chair that he'd tipped over earlier, and feels really fucking angry that he's so helpless, that Steve Harrington is *responsible* for him. Billy sits on the couch with his head in his hands for a while, feels the ache in his shoulder from the cut, feels like a piece of shit kid, feels angry.

Then he falls back asleep, because Harrington's couch is lumpy, but it's been a long fucking time since Billy felt this safe. That makes him feel vulnerable, and *that* makes him feel angry, but he's too tired to deal with that right now. It's honestly way too much *feeling* for one day.

Billy wakes up to the sound of a loud thump, kind of sweaty, and thinks of the sound his body made when he fell down the stairs all those years ago, and thinks of the sound Max's bat made when she crashed it between his legs. He'd never really been mad at her about it, mad about it sure, but not *at* her. Billy's three years older than he was then, and he understands much better the kind of anger that would make a little girl do that. He doesn't really like to think about Max, because she makes him feel sick, too.

He's still waking up, trying to work out why he's so sweaty and why he feels like his heart is about to shatter in his chest, and then he sits up fast, breathing hard and sudden, because the edges of the

nightmare still feel like they're scraping down his skin, and it's really hard to breathe, suddenly.

Billy counts, and counts again, and when he feels more like himself, he looks at Harrington. And Billy's angry, again, and small, again, and humiliated by his vulnerability, *again* in front of fucking Steve Harrington, and he hisses out through his teeth and looks Harrington up and down. He's in boxers, has kept in good shape since high school, and Billy lets himself leer at the muscles in Harrington's stomach, the way his shoulders and arms have filled out a little, the line of his jaw. "Hiya, princess," he says, leans forward a little bit, puts on a fucking show, "You want to fuck?"

Later, Billy will be a little surprised by how much he actually meant the question he was asking. In the moment though, it works. Harrington disappears back into the bedroom, and Billy gets to lie back down and feel safe and sleepy and angry for a while longer.

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Harrington set the table for breakfast while Billy was in the shower. He eats all the fucking eggs and toast, because that scares Billy a little bit, and makes him feel angry. He grins at Harrington, wild and a little out of control when he comes back out, but Harrington has a *t-shirt* for him, because Billy's is dirty, and Billy's brain is too full of too much to process that productively. He wants a fight.

"Holy shit," Harrington says to him when Billy's half lifted off his shirt. "Hargrove, I think you need to go to like, the hospital."

Billy thinks he's probably right, but hospitals are expensive, and he's not bleeding. "Fuck off, princess," he says instead of agreeing, fighting with the t-shirt and how much it hurts his fucking shoulder to try and change it. In the bathroom, alone, he'd figured it out. Out here in front of Harrington, he can't hide the pained noises he can't stop making behind the sound of running water. Except then Harrington comes over to help him. He pulls Billy's still-bloody t-shirt off drops it on the floor while Billy kind of dumbly holds the shirt Harrington gave him to put on. Harrington prods the cut from the glass topper, and sighs a little dramatically about it. Billy had ripped the bandages the cops had put on off before he showered. It hadn't

crossed his mind that he should re-bandage it or anything.

Harrington's hands are warm and gentle, and that's too fucking much for Billy, who can't really breathe as Harrington touches him. Billy doesn't really like being touched unless he's fucking someone, and it puts him on edge. Then Harrington drags his hand down the muscles of Billy's stomach, more admiringly than absent-minded, even though Billy knows Harrington won't own the action.

Billy *wants* all of the sudden, and thinks about closing the gap between them, pressing their bodies together, throwing them onto the couch and fucking Harrington like he'd thought about a few times before the thing with the bat and before Billy basically broke his face.

Billy doesn't do that though, and then Harrington kind of very fucking gently sits him in a chair and touches his face, and that's scary and kind, too. Billy needs it, this touch and care, and he fucking hates it, it scares him. Harrington drags his thumb across Billy's lower lip, and Billy feels that want again, lets his lips part a little, kind of dares Harrington to do it.

Harrington doesn't take the bait, he backs off and goes to make himself some more eggs, and Billy isn't really paying attention until he hears "--Max...already at school...talked to your dad." Then, all Billy can hear is the rushing in his ears, a cresting wave of absolute panic, the kind of rage he still doesn't have a name for. Billy loses it, a little, the hours since Harrington had picked him up building and building, and it's all the fear, and the vulnerability, and the anger, and the feeling safe--it's all of that, all at once, rising from his stomach to his throat, and Billy leans into it, lets himself feel wild and unhinged. He's been looking for a reason to fight. Harrington called his dad. Billy's got a reason.

He loses it, a little, and Harrington shoves him, and the pain of his head hitting the counter brings Billy back to himself a little, just in time to see Harrington lose it, a little, on the floor, and Billy thinks that he didn't know perfect Steve Harrington had any reason to be his own kind of fucked up. But Harrington does, clearly, it comes out in an angry burst, and it ends with Billy slamming the door to Harrington's apartment, standing outside in a t-shirt in the biting November air, and he doesn't fucking care. He didn't need

Harrington, or his lumpy couch, or his seal of approval anyway. He's fine--at least, a little.

It's a few frigid days before he gets drunk and lands in a heap on the steps to Harrington's apartment. It's the first time he comes back to Harrington like some sort of fucking homing pigeon. It isn't the last.

~

The problem was that Billy had gotten comfortable, so when the cop calls, weeks later, and says that everything is fucking fine, now, it catches him off guard. Billy had gotten comfortable, with Harrington's warm apartment, with the way he leaves the lights on all the goddamn time--it's kind of like Max, actually--or the way Harrington needs the tv on to fall asleep. He'd gotten used to someone warm in bed next to him, not the kind of bed where he can't tell someone else is there, but the kind of bed that in his stupidest, stupidest fucking moments Billy kind of sometimes thinks about as *theirs*.

Harrington gives Billy space when he sleeps nearly one hundred percent of the time. There's a night every few nights where he doesn't, where Harrington is sort of like a needy, clingy octopus, and Billy doesn't really think Harrington is particularly conscious when he gets like that, when he wraps himself around Billy and puts his head on Billy's chest over his heart, when he's shaking, just a little, and the contact--and Billy turning the tv on--seem to calm him down. By morning he's usually back on his side of the bed, so Billy honestly doesn't even know if Harrington knows he's doing it. Billy thinks that's probably why he lets it happen. They'll never have to talk about it.

But the cop calls, and says everything is fine now, and Billy had gotten comfortable. Billy carefully does not think about the look on Harrington's face when he says, "I'll get out of your hair," because Billy knows how shit works. He's so fucking stupid, and so fucking angry at himself for being this stupid. He'd gotten comfortable, what had he been thinking? So Billy stands in Harrington's kitchen and tells him he's out, bye, because--because he doesn't think that he can handle it, Harrington asking him to leave. Billy has spent most of his life teetering on the edge of broken, and that would push him right

off, and Billy knows he isn't strong enough for that to happen.

Standing outside in a cold Chicago early December, Billy thinks about how he'd gotten to Harrington's with nothing, and he leaves with a whole bag full of stuff and a warm coat. He feels fucking hollowed out, though, so it doesn't really matter.

~

Billy is standing, a few weeks later, nearly Christmas, on the porch of his house in Hawkins, and wondering why he's so fucking stupid. He's called a few times over the years, usually for Max's birthday, once for Christmas, and he'd even been back once. Max had called him, a year and a half ago, and said his dad was sick. Billy had taken a bus back to Hawkins because he didn't really know what else to do, and Max had sounded kind of freaked out, which was unusual. His dad had gotten better though, after his visit, which--Billy thinks privately--had been a real fucking shame.

He wonders if he should knock or just go in. Billy doesn't really feel like he lives here anymore, and he doesn't want to piss his dad off right from the start. Honestly, he doesn't even know if there's a place for him to *sleep* here, and he'd paid for a fucking bus, but he hadn't brought anything with him. He tugs his jacket around himself, still staring at the door like it's going to answer his question, and then is saved the effort because Max opens the door and stares at him.

"Hi," she says, taller now and so much less his *little* sister. She's actually kind of beautiful, and also really tall, which Billy guesses she was always going to be, but it's like--different. She's all sharp edges and big eyes, which still look dangerous. "Steve called about you a second time."

"Hi," he answers, then he hears the second part and says, "Why?"

"He wanted to know if I saw you. He was kind of drunk, actually, so I don't think he meant to call. Just wanted to."

It's weird to know that Harrington is calling around looking for him. Billy rubs the back of his neck, licks his lips--an old impulse--Max pulls a face. "Come in," she says after Billy doesn't say anything.

“Your dad isn’t here,” she adds, when Billy hesitates at the threshold. “They’re out.” Billy nods and goes inside, and he sits in the kitchen while Max makes them coffee. He doesn’t really know where any of the stuff to make coffee is anymore. It’s a relief, in a way, to know--so suddenly and clearly and for certain--that this isn’t home.

They talk, in a stilted, awkward way, about her college applications. He asks about a boyfriend--still the Sinclair kid--and about the rest of the freaks. Harrington calls them termites when he talks about them, and Billy almost says that, but at the last second doesn’t. Max asks a little bit about Harrington, but Billy doesn’t want to talk about it, and she talks to Harrington enough--or about him with the freaks enough--that it’s not like Billy could give her any news.

Billy thinks of himself as a grown ass man, most of the time, but his stomach still drops and his grip on the counter goes white-knuckled when he hears his dad’s car in the driveway a few hours later. It’s dark out. Max watches him for a second, then walks out of the kitchen, calm.

He hears her at the door, “Hi mom,” she says, “Hi Neil.” Max doesn’t hesitate, there’s no flinch in her voice when she says, “Billy’s in the kitchen. He’s here to visit,” and Billy admires her for it, the way she walks into the kitchen next to his dad and looks calm and confident and like she feels safe. Billy feels like he’s going to throw up, like he should run away, like he should beat his dad’s head in with the chair he’s sitting in before his dad can do it to him.

“Hi, honey,” Susan says, too sweet and saccharine, and she walks over and gives Billy a kiss on the cheek, and Billy’s just staring at his dad, who doesn’t say anything except, “What’s for dinner?” to Susan and then, “Make enough for him, if you can,” before he walks away.

If you can. The words bounce around in Billy’s skull. Feeding him is still, he guesses, an option.

They all make it through dinner, which is chicken and so fucking awkward Billy spends most of it feeling kind of light headed and like he can’t breathe. Billy helps Susan with the dishes, and he pretends not to know it’s because he wants to show his dad how good he is now at *respect* and *responsibility*. They’d eaten really early, and Billy

figures out why when Susan asks Max if she's ready to be driven to the Byers's for dinner. Billy wonders if the living room he'd woken up in after he'd tried to hurt a little kid and Max had stabbed him with a needle full of drugs still looks the same. He swallows hard around the memory. Fuck.

Max looks a little guilty--and she shouldn't, Billy thinks, because none of this is her fault--to leave him alone with his dad, and she lingers with him in the hallway after Susan's gone out to warm the car. "Steve is going to be there," she says, and Billy had known that Harrington would be in town because he knows that Harrington always comes home for the holidays, but it's still a little startling to have it laid out so clearly for him. Billy doesn't say anything. Max reaches out and touches his shoulder, and she looks a little freaked out, "Uh," she says, like she had three years before when he was packing up his stuff.

"You too," he says, and he watches her walk out to the car, get in with Susan, and then he shuts the door to the house. He's alone in it with his dad again, for the first time in years.

In the end, there was nothing he could do to not make his father angry at him. It was one of the plates that does it--not all the way dried, which had been Susan's job and not Billy's, and his dad smashes it against Billy's shoulder, and hits him, and it's the same it always was, except this time Billy hauls himself off the floor and says, "Fuck you," and spits blood at his dad's feet, and then he leaves.

He takes Max's old bike, and goes to Steve Harrington's house, his hands shaking, because it's like he's a fucking homing pigeon or something, and also, where else is he going to go?

~

There's a moment, sitting on the island in Harrington's kitchen, where Billy thinks that he'd miscalculated. He's fucking horrified at himself, sitting on the counter, beat up, but mostly vulnerable because Billy had said--basically said, anyway--*I need you*, and Harrington is rooting around in the freezer like he doesn't give two shits. "Well fuck you too, then," Billy says, going for angry and full of vitriol, but he misses the mark and then hates himself, because his

voice cracks and he's going to--what? Cry? Yes, definitely fucking cry in Steve Harrington's beautiful fucking kitchen, in a house where he still has a bedroom, and like, clothes, because he has a *home* here in Hawkins still, and Billy's never sure if all this has been done to him or if it's his fault, not really, but he'd been kind of hoping Harrington would stick around while Billy tried to work it out.

Harrington turns around though, and he's got this kind of dumb look on his face, and he's holding a bag of frozen corn. He takes Billy's cigarette away, and Harrington is looking at Billy like he's going to put a *bag of frozen corn* on his face, and Billy feels broken and sad and angry, and he opens his mouth to tell Harrington you're supposed to use peas, but then Harrington's got a hand on his face, and he's got a hand in Billy's hair, and he put Billy's cigarette out on his mother's kitchen island, holy fuck, but Billy doesn't say anything about it at all, because then Harrington kisses him.

Harrington's hand is cold from the freezer where it's still holding Billy's face, and it feels kind of nice against the ache and burn of the bruises, but it doesn't feel anything near as nice as Harrington's tongue does, dragging over Billy's lower lip, and Billy leans into it, kisses Harrington back all teeth and tongue.

Harrington pulls him off the counter, and says, "Let's go to bed," and Billy says--or thinks--he isn't sure, "Fuck, yes," and lets Harrington lead him up this grand fucking staircase and into his bedroom.

Billy thinks it's nothing like Harrington's bedroom in Chicago, which really looks like him, and feels like the man he's becoming. This bedroom feels like the Harrington that was, King Steve, basketball stuff on the walls, and a kind of boring comforter. Billy also thinks it feels warm, and lived in, and cared about, and it makes him jealous in a way he doesn't know how to name. He feels angry then, suddenly, and he wants to leave or break something, or both, but then Harrington's crowding up against him.

He pushes a hand up under Billy's shirt, and Billy's mind blanks out for a second as Harrington pulls it off, then tugs off his own shirt, and then they're kissing again, and Billy gets his hands in Harrington's hair and backs him up toward the bed, pushes him down onto it. Harrington laughs, which startles Billy, who is usually all focus and

want and feeling about fucking, but Harrington laughs and looks up at Billy, and Billy thinks that's fucking weird, but also kind of nice.

Billy leans down to kiss him again, and it's teeth and tongue, hot and slick, like he's used to. He bites at Harrington's lip, revels in the sound Harrington makes, but then Harrington pushes, "No," he says, and Billy's startled, starts to back up, gets off the bed, but Harrington catches Billy by the wrists, pulls him back until Billy's in the bed again, and Harrington crawls between his legs, still sort of smiling, "Not like that, Billy, jesus," and then Harrington's kissing him, and it's slow.

The hand sliding down his stomach almost surprises him, but not as much as the confidence with which Harrington undoes Billy's jeans and wraps a hand around his cock does. "Fuck," Billy hisses, pushing into it as Harrington pumps him once, twice, "Fuck," Billy says again. "Harrington--" and then he stops, because he wants to say--and then he just does-- "Why are you still dressed? Take off your fucking clothes," and Harrington laughs *again*, but not at him.

They both scramble to get undressed, and then Billy isn't really sure what to do, because he doesn't know how to do *this*, slow and together and in bed, and he's also kind of surprised that Harrington knows how to do *this*, as in, with another guy, but then they've both done a lot of growing up since high school, so maybe he shouldn't be surprised.

"What do you want?" Harrington asks him, and Billy thinks, *you* with every inch of his body, but he doesn't really mean that in the sexual sense, and Harrington is definitely thinking about sex.

"I want to blow you," Billy says, because he does, and then he's pulling Harrington to the edge of the bed and enjoying the way Harrington's eyes get kind of wide when Billy sinks to his knees. He takes Harrington into his mouth, all of him, and swallows around him. Harrington makes this noise that Billy feels in every inch of him, so he does it again, and Harrington gets a hand in his hair and pulls.

"Fuck," Harrington keeps saying, because he hasn't gotten any more eloquent over the years, "Fuck, fuck," and he tugs at Billy's hair and Billy tilts his head up, looks at him, holds Harrington's gaze and

watches the way Harrington's eyes darken. Billy pulls back and drags his tongue over Harrington's cock, slow and teasing, "Billy," Harrington says, "I'm gonna fucking--" and Billy takes Harrington back into his mouth, listens to the sound he makes as he comes, and swallows.

Harrington collapses back on the bed, breathing hard, "Come here," he says, tugging at the hand in Billy's hair, and Billy does. He crawls back into bed next to him, and Harrington kisses him again, still slow and measured. He bites at Billy's lip and Billy moans a little, but then Harrington shifts, gets a hand around Billy's cock, and Billy would be embarrassed about how quickly he comes if it didn't feel so fucking good.

Harrington cleans them both up with the t-shirt he'd dropped at the foot of the bed in their scramble to get naked, then gets back into bed. He kisses at Billy's hip, then his stomach, and it takes Billy a second to realize those are old scars or fresh bruises. When he pulls level with Billy, he holds his gaze. Billy thinks Harrington is going to kiss him again, but he doesn't. He leans down and presses his forehead against Billy's, and Billy feels raw and bruised from the intimacy of it. "You should stay for Christmas," Harrington says, and Billy slides a hand into Harrington's hair, he wants him to stop talking, he can't-- "Don't go back to your dad's house. And then, I don't know. Maybe come back home to--to--Chicago, or whatever?"

Billy feels like he's floating, and thinks it's because he doesn't feel angry, not at all, not even a little. "Yeah," he says to Harrington, because where else is he gonna go?

Also, because he wants to.